

**An address given by The Right Reverend Robert O'Neill
at the 128th Annual Convention of The Episcopal Church in Colorado
on Thursday, 1 October 2015**

"Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed...?"

—Mark 4:21

Not too long ago I was walking through Denver International Airport with Herb O'Driscoll—a priest of the Anglican Church of Canada and one of the greatest preachers I have ever heard. It was Holy Week. We were returning from Grand Junction where Herb had preached at Saint Matthew's for the annual renewal of ordination vows. Out of the blue, Herb said, "You know, Rob, you and I are the last of a generation."

I don't know what precipitated it. There we were in the middle of the B Concourse on a moving walkway—me in a purple shirt, Herb in black, both of us wearing clerical collars, a bishop and a priest, the two of us surrounded by people of all sorts, all at various stages of a journey, all focused on the task of getting somewhere else—and Herb said, "You know, Rob, you and I are the last of a generation."

When I asked him what he meant, he said, "You and I are the last generation of whom it can be assumed that we have at least some religious vocabulary, or possess some rudimentary awareness of Judeo-Christian tradition, or have even some basic knowledge of the biblical story." (Please do not miss the image: a priest and a bishop in the middle of Holy Week surrounded by a preoccupied, distracted, and dislocated mass of people, all on a journey, all in transition, all looking to get somewhere else. Think about it. It works. This is who we are. This is the Church in the world.)

We must understand that the cultural and religious landscape around us has shifted significantly. We, the Church, must recognize that the inherited and unchallenged assumptions of our past—of who we are in relationship to the world, of what we think the Church should look like, or how we should operate, or of what we think constitutes ecclesiastical success—the inherited and unchallenged assumptions of our past simply will not serve us well in the work of the gospel today. As our keynote speaker, Greg Garrett, will point out, the shifting religious climate of our day is not a cause for despair but is instead an invitation—an invitation to take a big step back, to take a thoughtful and honest look at ourselves, and then to step in and step up our game.

From the beginning, Peter complained to Jesus that he and his companions had labored all night and had caught nothing, and what does Jesus say? "You have to set out into the deep water." There's a clue. God's vision for us is always greater than our vision for our selves, and the invitation before us, I believe, is to enter more deeply into a life and practice of prayer. To claim more fully the dynamic reality of the Holy Spirit living within us and moving among us. To be more intentional and disciplined about being formed more substantively in a living relationship with the living God. To take more risks as God's people by living more imaginatively and more creatively and more courageously as the body of Christ in the world. To understand

and to claim (as our new Presiding Bishop would say) that we are part of the “Jesus movement,” and then to take up – without hesitation, embarrassment, or fear – the work of evangelism.

There. I said it. *Evangelism*.

This is the all-important work that I want to hold up before us as we begin this 128th Convention of The Episcopal Church in Colorado. It is one of the essential marks of mission—to proclaim to those who do not know it the good news of the love that is Jesus in a world that is desperate to know that pure unbounded love. Evangelism is one of the three essential and inseparable components of our missional identity as we have articulated it here in Colorado. Proclamation. Discipleship. Servanthood. To proclaim to those who do not know it the good news of the love that is Jesus. To make and be made into disciples of Jesus. And like Jesus, to live freely and generously in a relationship of service to all people. There you are: Proclamation. Discipleship. Servanthood.

In 1973, the General Convention of The Episcopal Church adopted this definition of evangelism. It comes from Archbishop William Temple who wrote that, “[Evangelism] is the presentation of Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, in such ways that persons may be led to believe in Him as Savior, and follow Him as Lord within the fellowship of His Church.” This is our life’s work, this work of evangelism. We commit ourselves to it at baptism when we say that we will “proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.” It is not an optional exercise. As N.T. Wright once put it, the good news of God’s kingdom “did not spread by magic.” As Andy Doyle, the Bishop of Texas, says, “the very work of the Church is to bring people to God.”

Evangelism is intensely personal and profoundly significant. It is deeply healing and transformational. Evangelism is a life-giving enterprise. I would not be here if Russell C. Cushman of Navasota, Texas, had not invited me into an ongoing conversation about Jesus and about how that relationship might change my life. For that I will always be grateful. Even more importantly, you wouldn’t be here either. None of us would be here tonight unless others who knew something of the love of Jesus had not taken the time to share that love with us and to invite us into an intentional, thoughtful, and ongoing relationship with the living God in Christ.

So what do you suppose it might take for all of us in The Episcopal Church in Colorado to become more committed to and intentional about the ministry of evangelism?

It may be as simple as just naming it, naming evangelism for what it is—an essential and life-giving work in our common life and ministry. During our regional convocations, I invited people to share “God moments” or “God sightings” with one another. There did not seem to be a lack of good news to share. People said that they found the exercise energizing and inspiring. Some said that they found the interaction to be refreshingly meaningful, that they were drawn into a deeper relationship. Some said that it challenged them to pay attention, to open their eyes and be more mindful of the grace in their lives. Still others said that just the sharing of an experience of grace made that grace real and present to them once again. It was an act of remembrance and they spoke of gratitude.

We do have stories of good news to proclaim, and during this convention you will hear and see stories of good news from across the diocese. You will be invited to share more of your

own stories, and you will be asked to prayerfully take “The Proclamation Pledge” (more about that tomorrow). It is all intended to strengthen and encourage us in the work of evangelism, and if the work of evangelism is an ecclesiastical muscle that we need to exercise and strengthen, then I say, as our friends at Nike would say, “Just do it!”

I recognize that within The Episcopal Church there has been historically a certain discomfort with the work of evangelism. Much of that, I believe, is directly related to a lack of our own spiritual formation—the feeling that we ourselves lack the knowledge and vocabulary necessary to be thoughtful and effective evangelists. If it is any consolation, let me encourage you to read The Acts of the Apostles. It is a perfectly reasonable reading of the history of the early Christian community to conclude that the disciples had absolutely no clue about where they were really going and even less understanding of what they were actually doing. But they did have love. They loved of Jesus. They knew the grace of the Holy Spirit, and throughout their gathering and prayer and discussion and debate and worry and anxiety and upheaval from within and without, they trusted. They trusted in the love of Jesus, and they were willing to learn and to be formed by Jesus in the way of love.

As I said in my address two years ago, I believe that Christian formation is the key. It is a simple equation: the more deeply we enter into our relationship with Jesus, the more fearlessly and spontaneously we move out into the world to proclaim the good news of God’s love. Tonight I am pleased to say that the Christian Formation and Leadership Development Team that was announced last year is now in place. During this convention you will have the opportunity to hear about their work. They are building the vision for our Center at Cathedral Ridge—a resource for us all; a place where over 80% of our congregations have gathered to pray, to learn, to listen, to collaborate, and to be formed in faith; a place where last summer nearly 600 young people from Cortez to La Junta and beyond the borders of Colorado gathered for the Explore Program, for Colorado Episcopal Service Corps, and the Colorado Youth Leadership Initiative—all of it to be more deeply formed in a living relationship with the living God. Our new Christian Formation and Leadership Development Team is building our capacity for connectivity and formation across the distances and divides of our state. They are tapping into the collective talent and wisdom that is already among us. Their goal is to create meaningful communities of learning and formation and practice that are accessible to anyone in any congregation or community across the diocese. Christian formation is an essential and life-long spiritual discipline and practice, and the equation is simple: our witness to the gospel, our ability to proclaim the good news of God’s kingdom among us, is directly proportionate to the depth of our own formation.

There is also a greater challenge that we all face in our collective work of evangelism. Simply this: Proclaiming the good news of God’s unconditional love requires substantive engagement with the world around us. Read the gospels. Jesus did not remain comfortably surrounded by his friends in the Galilean countryside. He “set his face” to Jerusalem. He set his heart of love into the heart of power. Read the Acts of the Apostles. The disciples discover that the more closely they follow Jesus, the more they attend to the Holy Spirit, the more they are taken out of themselves and out of their comfort zones. How about that? The followers of Jesus must move through their fears and beyond their prejudices and across divides and into relationships they never would previously have dared to imagine were theirs to have. Those of us who follow Jesus will always be taken out of our self-isolated and self-isolating little worlds into the expansive world of God’s kingdom, and there we will always be challenged not only to

proclaim the good news of God's love to others but in so doing to discover something even more wonderful—that the real depth and power of God's love can only be truly experienced in the arms, in the loving embrace, of "the other," whoever that "other" may be to us.

That is a challenge. It is absolutely a growing edge for all of us. We need to be willing to go there. We need think only of the headlines of the past year—Ferguson, Charleston, and today thirteen people killed in a mass shooting at an Oregon campus. If this does not constitute a call to God's people, I do not know what does. As those who are committed to "seeking and serving Christ in all people," how might we learn about and find ways of addressing meaningfully the systemic causes of poverty and violence in our world? How might we meaningfully engage open and honest and compassionate conversations about race and racial inequality in our communities? How might we welcome the stranger among us and create life-giving space for the immigrant communities among us? How might we establish productive relationships and collaborative partnerships with community groups outside the Church so that we might all be formed more deeply in love? Risky? Yes. Uncomfortable? You bet. Unknown and unfamiliar territory? Of course. But once again, read the Acts of the Apostles. I do not have easy answers, but I do know this: Our world longs for a more transcendent vision of itself, a vision of human beings being fully human, fully alive, fully in love—and last time I checked, that would be us.

"So what do you think?" Jesus asks. "Is a lamp brought into a room to be put under a basket? Or is a lamp brought into a room to be tucked, say, under the bed? Well what do you think?"

It is a brilliant question. There is only one possible response: "Of course, not!" There is no alternative. The answer is self-evident. It is a no brainer. It requires no academic training, no theological degree, no particular credentials, and very little critical thinking to answer. Everybody knows what lamps are made for. Lamps are made to give light. Lamps are intended to help people see. Lamps are made to help people find their way, to help people negotiate and live in an environment that would otherwise be dark and non-negotiable. So of course you don't put lamps under things. That would be self-defeating. You put lamps out so that they can give light. That's their purpose. That's what lamps are made for.

"Right," says Jesus. "You are absolutely right. Well said. Spot on."

Then comes the unspoken question—the question that emerges out of the holy silence between the lines of the gospel—the real question, the pointed question, the challenging question, and the invitation. "So tell me then," asks Jesus, "what are *you* made for?"

Just this: To proclaim love, to be love, to bring love into life in this world.

—Amen.